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Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich
ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-75878>
Journal Article

Originally published at:
Boothe, B; Thoma, G (2012). Unsatisfactory Narration or the Narrative Mediation. Journal of Literary Theory:25-40.

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Unsatisfactory Narration or the Narrative Mediation of Atrocious Presence? Narratives of Jewish Survivors of National Socialist Concentration Camps

Someone who experiences a severe car crash, an assault on life and limb, or a natural disaster finds himself at the mercy of a series of events in which he is stripped of his ability to act and regulate what happens; in which measures of self-protection, flight, and defence have no effect; and in which physical, social, or psychological integrity is threatened. Situations of this kind should be seen as traumatic in the traditional sense of the word: they cause a wound, damage to tissue, a physical or mental injury. Traumatic impairment brings about a temporary decrease in physical, social, or psychological functionality, or leads to decompensation. The decreased functionality or the process of decompensation can also affect spatio-temporal, relational and situational orientation. The affected person is then subsequently unable to reconstruct the traumatic events adequately. This is one of the reasons that suggest that traumatic experiences cannot be adequately narratively represented in retrospect. Certain details of the intrusive events, though, are, according to psychophysiology and brain research, preserved in body memory – particularly sensations and individual perceptual impressions. Thus, there can emerge a reconstruction of the experience that is characterized by ruptures, breaks and gaps, a loosely connected profusion of details, fragmentation, or the style of an impersonal report, the latter being particularly likely when the process of remembering becomes emotionally overwhelming. It is not clear whether the features of formulation and representation mentioned here will prove to be trauma-specific

or apply also to other processes of reconstruction involving what is hard to represent and to other forms of emotional overwhelming such as extreme surprise, joy, and pride, as well as, for example, horror at one's own actions.

Someone who is, as victim or witness, caught up in devastating violence needs the subsequent restoration of damaged integrity; every wound requires a subsequent healing process. For many people, this is achieved swiftly and completely; others are burdened with lasting psychological impairments. These patients have not only had a traumatic experience in the traditional sense of the word; they are considered traumatized or are officially diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. The question of the risk of being affected by post-traumatic stress disorder and what aspects of personality or what pre-existent factors increase or reduce this risk has not yet been resolved; the same is true of the question of an individual's traumatization threshold. It is not possible to make a general statement about what threatening encounters are accompanied by what risk of destabilization and dysfunctionality for whom.

Narrating in retrospect about destructive, disturbing, intrusive events that have been endured is felt to be a major challenge, if not to say too much of one, for those affected. According to psychiatric and psychotherapeutic knowledge, the narrative mediation of these events is usually unsatisfactory. There are numerous questions that remain open in relation to this. How does this relate to processes involving the orientation and memory functions? Is this state of affairs part of the way that post-traumatic stress disorder presents itself, or can it be observed independently of it? Is narrative presentation dependent on the circumstances of communication, on situation and context? On writing as distinct from orality? Is it dependent on the content of the event? On collectivity as distinct from the exceptional character of the destructive events that were suffered? Are humiliating and embarrassing experiences, for example, particularly hard to relate? When is it a case of a lack of narrative competence, when of an unwillingness to narrate? What roles are played by the temporal proximity and temporal distance of events? Have the norms of unsatisfactory narration been well substantiated? From a psychiatric or psychological perspective, lack of coherence is usually considered a sign of insufficient narrative organization, yet the terminological description for diagnostic purposes is in most cases only a superficiality. The implicit reference to a normative model of narrative, moreover, obscures the potential creativity and special expressiveness of narrating about potentially traumatizing occurrences. These questions require intensive further research in an interdisciplinary context.

Everyday narration is a resource for generating resonance and acceptance. Successful narrative communication allows one's own interests and desires to be represented and past things to be brought to life before a sympathetic social other. Everyday narration brings context, incisiveness and structure, the construction of a plot, and a flow based on tension. Is this not the case with traumatic experiences? Are experiences of an extreme nature, for example those of victims of Na-

tional Socialist violence and imprisonment, not or not as much characterized on an oral level by shape, incisiveness, and narrative flow, as well as an intense emotional involvement – as is the case in the narrative representation of events from an everyday life that is not subject to an existential threat? Can survivors of the National Socialist camps establish a personal frame of reference when they narrate? While autobiographical narration in an everyday situation in medical and psychological contexts seems well suited to introducing a personal perspective, it is not clear whether concentration camp survivors identify with the represented I when they narrate, whether they can engage in the direction of a narrative and the shaping of roles in it, whether they expect and are able to cope with sympathy and empathy.

Trauma research tends to deny this. Our narrative analysis of audio recordings of interviews with survivors of National Socialist concentration camps leads to the opposite result. The narrated episodes about devastating experiences all have features of moulded and incisive narration – for example, a flow of progression with a marked beginning and a marked end, the representation of individual specific episodic events as perfectly valid narrative progressions, the relation of dialogue scenes in direct speech with the corresponding vocal and prosodic form.

We explore processes of narrative representation with reference to this particular narrative corpus. The narrating individuals have not been diagnosed with stress disorders. They are consistently of a considerable age and do not exhibit any cognitive or affective limitations. The narratives concern events that took place a long time ago in their lives, events that struck people who were, in the context of National Socialist racial persecution, hunted down, deported, interned, tortured, and subjected to systematic killing. What we have are the experiences of a collective persecuted in the unjust regime of National Socialism.

Former Jewish prisoners in National Socialist concentration camps agreed to be interviewed as witnesses for the Archive of Memory (the material is in the Moses Mendelssohn Center, Potsdam); looking back on their lives in retrospect, they orally describe catastrophic experiences of danger, violence, and deprivation. Alongside individual, narrator-specific linguistic forms, many narratives, which we found in ten recordings from the Moses Mendelssohn Center's Archive of Memory, each several hours long, display overarching features of composition that produce a substantial narrative flow of dreadful submission, deadly threat, and rescue. This contrasts with the unnarratability identified in linguistic analysis, and whose plausibility is supported by neuropsychology, and the circular and fragmentary linguistic patterns that are supposed to be characteristic of the communication of experiences of threat and violence, in particular in the context of imprisonment and internment. We found not unsatisfactory narrativity, but a multifaceted flow of evocative presence and descriptive distance, immediate manner and historicizing separation, with a distinctive reference to listeners or interaction. Negative experiences of an extreme nature can be narratable – in an elaborate fully

constructed and incisive mode of narration as a form of informative self-expression and self-positioning in social space.

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Full-length article in: JLT 6/1 (2012), 25–40.

How to cite this item:

Abstract of: Brigitte Boothe / Gisela Thoma, Defizitäres Erzählen oder narrative Vermittlung grausamer Präsenz? Jüdische Überlebende nationalsozialistischer Konzentrationslager erzählen.

In: JLTonline (20.02.2012)

Persistent Identifier: urn:nbn:de:0222-002025

Link: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0222-002025>